

To touch the past: The painted pottery of the Mimbres people at the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota

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Abstract

The Weisman Art Museum holds a large collection of Mimbres painted pottery (1000 to 1150), resulting from an excavation in Southern New Mexico by university faculty and students from 1929 to 1931. Pottery, jewelry, ceramic miniatures, animal bone awls, and other tools were transferred from the Department of Anthropology in 1992.

Today, no one in anthropology studies this collection. And, in the decades since the excavation, both the science of archaeology and perceptions about Native Americans' control of their cultural heritage have changed considerably. The archaeologists who excavated the graves in which these pots were found had no doubts about the validity of their actions. Today we are not so sure. Change has prompted questions including: should these pots have been unearthed at all; should they be reburied? The federal Native American Graves Protection Act (NAGPRA, 1990) requires museums to return grave goods or sacred objects to native peoples who claim them and can prove they are the legitimate descendants of the makers. These pots, and many other objects made by ancient people around the globe, have been enshrined in climate-controlled display cases, watched by guards and security cameras, allowing everyone to see them while protecting them from the ravages of nature and man. They are no longer where their makers intended, covered with earth and hidden from view, acted upon by time and the elements. University museums are often left with the result of past excavations that would be handled quite differently today. The question is not how to make these objects relevant to the public – they are greatly admired by our visitors – but how to fill our mission of education while respecting the original makers' intentions and the desires of their descendants.

Introduction

Mimbres pottery, made more than a thousand years ago, is remarkable for its arrestingly beautiful paintings on the inside of bowls. The outsides were rarely decorated and the pots themselves are not notable in form or technique. But the painted images have extraordinary appeal to modern-day people around the world. The Mimbres people did not cover every surface. They knew how to use the white space as part of the design. They knew how to use the shape of the vessel to enhance the design. People love to look at these pots and are always amazed by the same thing that entranced Alfred Jenks, who excavated them – the contrast between the highly developed sense of design and their “primitive” mode of life.

The Weisman Art Museum holds a collection of more than 2,000 Mimbres artifacts, ranging from stone tools, arrowheads and points, to beads and pendants, and more than 1,000 of the beautiful painted bowls that are the trademark of these people.

These shallow bowls were found in graves, covering the head of the deceased or stacked up beside the skeleton. They almost always have lines around the edges, and depict primarily insects or animals or human representations. Some are narrative. Scholars suggest that the lines at the edge represent the horizon for these people who lived in river valleys surrounded by mountains, and that the center of the concave bowl represents their world. We know that they made other shapes, as some gourd shaped vessels have been found, but it is mostly the bowls that were buried.



Fig. 1 - Mimbres bowl perhaps showing man in turtle costume

Many of the bowls have a so-called 'kill hole'. Speculation ranges from a hole to let the breath – the spirit – escape or to allow the pot to return to the earth as the body does. Others suggest that the hole is simply a ritualized ceremony of grief. Not all of the pots have kill holes.

Jenks and his excavations

Albert E. Jenks, the leader of the excavations that brought the collections to the university founded the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, one of the earliest in the nation. He joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota in 1906 and initiated the university's first anthropology courses. Four years later the department

was reorganized into the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and in 1918 the anthropology department split off. Jenks was chair of this department until he retired in 1938.

Jenks's approach to anthropology at the University of Minnesota was in line with the race-based nationalism then prevalent in American intellectual life. Racial thought formed the disciplinary base of anthropology at the time, and of Jenks' career. In 1916, the US government hired Jenks to find the ratios of white-to-Indian blood in a population of Minnesotans to solve a land tenure dispute. Using skull-measuring indexes, Jenks 'scientifically' determined the 'whiteness' of his various specimens, a dubious exercise in racist pseudo-science already in disrepute with some leading anthropologists of the time.

Before he embarked on the Mimbres valley excavations, Jenks put his racial anthropology to work forming Indian and immigrant policies for the USA. He developed a chart for teaching prehistory that was based on a hierarchy of races.

Jenks had set his sights on the Mimbres valley in Southwestern New Mexico on a road trip to the region and was keen to give students hands on experience in archaeology, as well as undertake a major excavation himself. He persuaded the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the local universal museum, to co-sponsor his archaeological excavations beginning in 1928. He excavated at Warm Springs, Cameron Creek, Hot Springs and Galaz, but the largest number of finds were at Galaz.



Fig. 2 - Article from Minneapolis newspaper about the excavations

This was the era when museums were not merely repositories of knowledge they helped create it and participated widely in archaeology and other scholarship. The opening of King's Tut's tomb was a worldwide sensation in 1922 and the Mimbres pottery garnered local press of an equivalent level.

The *London Illustrated News* ran an article about the finds, with copious illustrations, and wondered at the "disparity between the highly developed sense of design possessed by the Mimbres craftsmen and their primitive mode of life" and proclaimed that "for their sheer ingenuity in combining the most complex geometric elements and for keenness in observing animal and bird life, the Mimbres potters are unique in all American prehistoric cultures". The headline was *America's finest Prehistoric Pottery: Incredible Mimbres Art*. Russell Plimpton, director and chief curator of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, was shown happily participating in the dig. Headlines reading A

Thrilling Quest, and *Jenks Strikes Rich Archaeological Vein*, and *Treasure Seekers in the Mimbres Valley* imply that the 'loot' was the main purpose of the excavations, but to be fair, the excavators paid attention to scholarly conclusions as well.

Dispersal of the collected material

American law says that artifacts found on private lands belong to the landowner although it is generally illegal for individuals to own excavated human remains. The presence of archaeological sites does not restrict the rights of the property owner and the sites and their contents belong to the property owners to manage as they choose. Jenks had the permission of the landowners for his excavations. At the conclusion of the university excavations, true treasure seekers moved in with bulldozers, destroyed the site, and looted the remaining pots, much to the dismay of the landowners who could not stop them.

About 800 pots from the excavations were divided equally between the university and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. All of the human remains, approximately 186 individuals went to the university of Minnesota anthropology department.

Richard Davis succeeded Russell Plimpton as MIA director in 1956. In the three years he was director, Davis unloaded some 4,500 objects from the museum's collection, including all of the Mimbres pots that had been deposited there from the digs in New Mexico. The university agreed to purchase all the artifacts from the joint excavations.

There is no written documentation of the terms of the purchase, but Eldon Johnson, who was chair of anthropology at the time, indicated that Davis considered these pots 'not art' – he was interested in Dutch old masters – and so nearly worthless. The university apparently bought all of the Mimbres artifacts from the MIA for about \$1 per pot. Mimbres pots have been sold for as much as \$150,000!

The human remains remained at the University of Minnesota, stored in the basement of the anthropology department along with the pots, jewelry, and other artifacts. They were used occasionally for research projects. A 1983 study entitled *Interobserver Reliability of Methods for Paleopathological Diagnosis of Dental Caries* by professors from the university's school of dentistry, was published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. There is no evidence that the remains were widely used for research or publication by the department and in 1987, they were transferred to the State's Bureau of Indian Affairs. They were placed in storage, where they remain.



Fig. 3 - The Mimbres pot that went missing

In late 1982 or early 1983 a bowl was stolen from the anthropology department's insecure storage in the basement of a university building. The rooms were widely accessible to any graduate student research or teaching assistant, who all had keys. Eldon Johnson, then department chair, believed that because of the subject of the painting, a collector might have commissioned the theft. The department must have been seriously concerned, however, to list it with the FBI. It was clearly more than a prank. The pot mysteriously re-appeared in the anthropology storage area a few years later.

Exhibition of the bowls

In the late 1980s, Eldon Johnson, who had engineered the purchase of the bowls from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, approached the director of the University gallery to see if we were interested in taking over the trusteeship of the pottery.



Fig. 4 - Mimbres bowl

Though the department no longer had any interest in the skeletons, or in the pottery, Johnson realized that the bowls had value beyond anthropology research. He recognized that the department was clearly not a trustworthy caretaker, in view of the theft of one of the most famous of the bowls a few years earlier. He determined to transfer them to a part of the university that would do a better job of caring for – and using – the artifacts. They were inventoried and physically moved to the museum in 1994, the year after the museum opened a new facility.

In 1996 the Weisman Art Museum opened a major exhibition of Mimbres bowls entitled *To Touch the Past: The Painted Pottery of the Mimbres People*. The

museum engaged two scholars, J.J. Brody, an art historian formerly at the University of New Mexico who was renowned for his work on Mimbres pottery, and Rena Swentzell, a Santa Clara pueblo Indian, whose biography states that she is indirectly descended from Mimbrenos. Though she doesn't mention it in her approved biography, she also has a PhD in American studies.

In addition to these two scholars, the museum engaged two Native American artists as consultants, and hired a Native American artist as installation designer. The museum published a scholarly catalogue, with Brody and Swentzell essays published side by side to emphasize the difference in their points of view about the materials.

Between the times, decades ago, when the university excavated this pottery, and now, both the science of archaeology and perceptions about Native American's control of their cultural heritage have changed considerably. The archaeologists who excavated them had no doubts about the rightness of their actions. Today, we are not so sure. Should these pots have been unearthed at all? While the bowls were not made especially for burial – wear marks indicate that some of them were heavily used – they plainly were intended by those who buried them to remain in the ground. Should they, as Rina Swentzell said, have been left in the earth to leave room for our own creativity? Does knowledge of the past inhibit our own creativity? She believes it does.

To our Western-European way of thinking, the present and the future may use the past. The paintings on the Mimbres pots, created more than a thousand years ago provide knowledge, beauty, and inspiration for us today and will for generations to come. That justifies our unearthing them and displaying them in museums.

These pots, and many other objects made by ancient people around the globe, are enshrined in museums in climate controlled display cases, allowing everyone to see them while protecting them from the ravages of nature and man. They are no longer situated where their makers intended, covered with earth and hidden from view, acted on by time and the elements.

Museums and universities are among the institutions of the modern world charged with the preservation of objects that people have created in the past. They preserve objects and extract

knowledge from them. We believe that these ancient objects serve legitimate purposes in the present and future. The notion that this is wrong or unimportant is unimaginable in the halls of any university.



Fig. 5 - Mimbres bowl



Fig. 6 - Mimbres bowl

Decisions and alternatives

In 1990, the United States federal government passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), as it is commonly called, provides a process for museums and federal agencies to return Native American cultural items – human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony – to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated Indian tribes. All federal agencies are subject to NAGPRA, as well as all public and private museums that have received federal funds – in essence, nearly every museum in the United States.

In 2002 the Minnesota State Native Affairs Council published in the Federal Register its inventory of the Mimbres human remains that had been transferred from the university. It stated that the notice of the inventory had been sent to eight tribes that might reasonably trace a shared ancestry to the Mimbres. To date, the remains are still in storage.

One difficulty is that no one can, according to strict NAGPRA rules, claim lineal descent. The Mimbres people inhabited desert valleys in what is now southwest New Mexico. They are known to have lived along small rivers flowing from the surrounding mountains starting around 550 CE. For a relatively short period of time, they made the distinctive pottery vessels that they are associated with today, probably between 1000 and 1150. Sometime between about 1130 and 1150, the Mimbres culture either ceased to exist or underwent radical change. It is still a mystery what happened to the Mimbres people. There are no signs of famine, warfare, or disease that could have wiped them out. But their departure apparently happened rather suddenly, and some scholars believe they may have organized a mass immigration due to environmental stress. All native groups in the American Southwest can probably claim indirect descent from the Mimbres people, but there is not a clear line to any one group.

The presence of a flourishing market in Mimbres ceramics also muddies the waters. The museum was told that if given to one of the most conservative groups who are among their possible descendants, the pots would be ground up and the dust buried, to make sure they could never be seen by anyone again.

If they were repatriated to other groups, they might be reburied but within five years, someone would have found them, excavated them again, and they would appear on the private market. The most

cynical view was that they after being repatriated, the pots would not be reburied at all but simply stored in a warehouse for a few years, and then appear on the market again.

Jerry Brody wrote that his “greatest unresolved conflict is between the deep pleasure he gets from Mimbres pottery and the empathy it stirs for those unknown people on the one hand and, on the other, his growing uncertainty about the ethics of preserving for the future things that originally were intended to be buried forever” (BRODY & SWENTZELL 1996). Rina Swentzell whose Pueblo Indian blood may link her to the ancient Mimbres people, also speaks of an unresolved conflict between intellectual knowledge of Mimbres art as a beautiful, powerful symbolic link with an otherwise lost past and ethical responsibility to those ancient people who buried that art with their dead.

Yet, these pots, and many other objects made by ancient people around the globe are enshrined in museums in climate controlled display cases, allowing everyone to see them while protecting them from the ravages of nature and man. They are no longer situated where their makers intended, covered with earth and hidden from view.

All museums, perhaps particularly museums in universities, represent, as Rina Swentzell characterized it, a European oriented perspective – “an insatiable desire to know, to understand, to intellectualize. Traditional Pueblo thought, on the other hand, values mystery”. In the Pueblo world view, she wrote, “humans do not need to know everything that there is to be known. It is more important to retain a sense of the unknown and ambiguity in the world than to uncover whatever is not obvious or readily explainable. The human past [...] is a universal past. No one can claim it and no one can ever know it completely” (BRODY & SWENTZELL 1996).

In fact, contemporary Native American artists in the Southwest have been greatly influenced by the discovery of Mimbres art. The revival of Native American Southwest pottery coincides with the discovery of Mimbres pottery in the 1920s. Bowls from the Swarts ruin inspired Maria Martinez at San Idefonso Pueblo, the most famous twentieth-century Indian potters from the Southwestern United States. At Acoma Pueblo, Lucy Lewis, another well-known artist, incorporated animal figures in the Mimbres style in her work.

Conclusion

Museums and universities are charged with the preservation of objects that people have created in the past. We preserve the past for use by the present and future. We create ideas around the past. The motto for my own university is *Driven to Discover*.

The excavation is flawed by the motives and attitudes of the archaeologists. At the same time, we've introduced to the world these wonderful artworks that lay unknown for thousands of years. Hundreds of scholars and artists come every year to look at these pots in our exhibits and study rooms. We can be fairly certain that this is not what the makers intended or ever imagined. We can put them back in the ground but we can't take back knowledge of them. So, for now, we will continue to live with the dilemma.

Literature cited

BRODY, J. J. & R. SWENTZELL 1996. *To touch the past. The painted pottery of the Mimbres People*. New York: Hudson Hills Press; Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota.

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